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Civil rights unit misused, says Nicaraguan defector

By Dave Doubrava
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A top official of Nicaragua's human rights commission has defected to the United States and charged the Marxist-led Sandinista government with compromising the commission's independence and using it for propaganda purposes.

Mateo Guerrero, former executive director of the commission, has told U.S. officials the Sandinista government has begun using the commission as a propaganda tool to

improve its image while prohibiting it from conducting independent investigations of human rights abuses.

Mr. Guerrero also has told U.S. officials that the commission, created as an autonomous body, has gradually come under the control of Nicaragua's Foreign Ministry, according to administration sources who spoke on condition they not be named.

He said the Foreign Ministry has increasingly prevented the commission from investigating human rights abuses by the government and that commissioners were told to "concentrate their efforts on the anti-Sandinistas," according to sources familiar with an administration report summarizing Mr. Guerrero's statements to U.S. investigators.

Mr. Guerrero apparently arrived in Miami about four months ago after telling Nicaraguan authorities he wanted to go there to study English. Once in the United States, he requested political asylum.

He is living at an undisclosed location in the United States because he fears retribution by the Sandinista government, said a source familiar with the matter.

The source said his application for political asylum is being processed and most likely would be approved.

"His information is useful because it gives us insight into the workings of the government and the relationship of the Foreign Ministry and the human rights commission," the source said.

"We already thought the commission was an instrument of the government of Nicaragua to protect themselves. But now someone directly, at the top level, is telling us that."

The source said the disillusioned Mr. Guerrero decided to defect because the commission was becoming a propaganda instrument of the government and because he feared he was coming to be viewed as an "counterrevolutionary" by the Sandinistas because of his work on the commission.

According to the source, "the straw that broke the camel's back" and led to his defection was Mr. Guerrero's investigation into the dis-

appearance of Ramon Ordonez Ramirez, a 17-year-old union activist arrested by Nicaraguan security forces in June 1983.

Mr. Guerrero told U.S. investigators he was appointed by a Nicaraguan court of appeals to investigate after Mr. Ordonez's family filed a writ seeking to know the young man's whereabouts.

After talks with the state security office, Mr. Guerrero "ran into a blank wall," the source said.

In September 1984, according to Mr. Guerrero's statement to U.S. investigators, Rafael Cordova Rivas, a member of the Sandinista government, gave the human rights commission a written statement and a list of imprisoned union sympathizers who were to be pardoned, and told the commission to release it to the media as a commission statement.

Mr. Ordonez's name was not on the list of those to be pardoned, the government said, because he had been released before the pardon decree was issued.

The commission refused to release the statement and list, but it appeared the next day in the media as if it had been issued by the com-

mission.

At the time of Mr. Guerrero's defection, the source said, Mr. Ordonez's family still had no word of the young man's whereabouts.

"Mr. Guerrero concluded — he was getting indications — that he was considered a counterrevolution-

ary because of his inquiries [in the Ordonez case], and that apparently led to his departure" from Nicaragua, the source said.

Mr. Guerrero also has told U.S. officials that a group of Americans living in Managua who are sympathetic to the Sandinistas met regularly in the government's human rights commission offices to plan strategies for weekly pro-Sandinista, anti-American demonstrations and peace vigils.

Yesterday The Associated Press reported that Mr. Guerrero, according to the administration's summary report of his statements to U.S. officials, alleged that:

• Alejandro Bendana, secretary-general of the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry, told the commission not to investigate allegations of abuses in the government's forced relocation of communities in northern Nicaragua and that commission members

"would only get themselves into trouble" if they pursued the matter.

• Mr. Bendana told the commission in January that it would be used to help the government establish liaison with foreign human rights groups to draw international attention to abuses by anti-Sandinista rebels. "The commission leaders were told to stop investigating any abuse committed by the government of Nicaragua and to concentrate their efforts on the anti-Sandinistas."

• Since 1982, the commission has not been allowed to investigate abuses in the Nicaraguan prison system. The chief of prisons, Raul Gordon, has rejected commission requests for release of prisoners, delayed or refused to meet with commission officials and "torn up commission letters in front of the officials without reading them."

• Six of nine commissioners appointed in 1983 place the political role of the Sandinista government above the human rights role of the commission.

State Department deputy spokesman Charles E. Redman declined comment on the Guerrero matter, but said "the thrust" of yesterday's AP report was correct.